DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 346 494 CS 213 416

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TITLE A Dialogic Approach to the Composing Process: Table Talk and the Romantic Essay.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Authors; Cooperative Learning; English Literature; Higher Education; Networks; *Romanticism; Social Behavior; Writing (Composition); Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS Collaborative Writing; Conversation; Historical Background

ABSTRACT

Many compositionists correctly charge Romanticism with conveying the iconography of the solitary writer and with embedding that image in modern ideology. There can be little doubt that numerous Romantic texts continue to exalt and signify the concept of the lonely genius and the self-contained text. Romantic masterpieces have contributed to the internalization of the epistemology of the male Romantic poets and its continuing dominance. The notion of the lonely artist is indeed a product of a specific cultural moment, and that historical reality, the Romantic era in England, supports a collaborative approach to writing and knowing that has been buried for decades. The key to that social sphere was conversation, or table talk. Modern compositionists were not the first to valorize conversation as an epistemological and psychological faculty. A few examples of how conversation and collaboration worked in the production of specific texts can be determined, including the relationship of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays, as well as some of William Hazlitt's comments. The famous dinner parties of the "London Magazine" writers were also a fertile environment of collaborative thinking, influencing, for example, Charles Lamb. Lamb frequently wrote drafts of his essays in letters to friends. Ironically, the ideology of the Romantic personal essay, entrenched in current composition pedagogy, was championed by writers like Hazlitt and Lamb who produced their texts largely through conversation and collaboration. (Seventeen references are attached.) (HB)

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A Dialogic Approach to the Composing Process: Table Talk and the Romantic Essay

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Although only a few months elapse between proposing and presenting a paper, it can be a long stretch intellectually. When I outlined this paper and helped facilitate this session, I was aware that one question could be posed: where are the women? Why three men speaking on only male essayists? While there are good personal answers to this question, it is also true that the study of the essay, and this session, participates in the patriarchal nature of the academy. The problem goes even further, to the ways in which we think about the essay and how we fit it into composition pedagogy.

I planned to focus on Lamb and the London Magazine writers here, and indeed I will talk about them. But the question, "Where are the women?" kept cropping up, greatly augmented by the insights and experience of an NEH Summer Seminar. What I discovered was that, indeed, there were women writing during the Romantic period, writing all sorts of stuff: phamphlets, tracts, plays, poems, novels, all of it. And eventually what I came to realize was that the absence of women writers in our traditional

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canon was intimately bound up with the primacy of the singular author, with patriarchy, with the authoritarian, teacher-centered composition classroom.

Many compositionists correctly charge Romanticism with conveying the iconography of the solitary writer, with embedding that image in our ideology. Linda Brodkey, for example, in her influential College English piece on "Modernism and the Scene(s) of Writing," notes that "The writer-writes-alone is a familiar icon of art and is perhaps most readily understood as a romantic representation of the production of canonical literature, music, painting, sculpture" (396). Lunsford and Ede even more specifically claim that "arguments like [Edward] Young's, Fichte's, and Wordsworth's inherently and inevitably limit authorship to individuals writing alone" (85). Addressing the singular "authority of knowledge" that collaborative learning engages, Kenneth Bruffee asserts that "We could [and do, Bruffee suggests] believe that the authority of knowledge [is] lodged in the mind of a person of genius: a Wordsworth, an Einstein, or a Freud" (649; my emphasis). Anne Ruggles Gere offers one of the best analyses of how the Romantics inscribed the solitary genius:

> Wordsworth and his contemporaries asserted that they, not established systems of thought, were central to knowing. ...This aesthetic concept of originality as genius interacted with the legal-economic concept of ownership, particularly as it was developed in Germany, to produce the modern concept of authorship.

And, indeed, there can be little doubt that a document like the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads or texts like "Alastor" or "Adonais" continue to exalt and signify the concept of the lonely genius and, as Bruffee suggests, the concept of the self-contained text.

Those canonized masterpieces have contributed, in large part, to the internalization of the epistemology of the male Romantic poets. It has only been in the last eight years that Romanticists have begun to question their own methodology--that is, that they have discovered that the foundations of their own reading, writing, and epistemology was laid by the traditional Romantics and organs like the Edinburgh Review. Jerome McGann, in an influential 1983 book, aptly called this the "Romantic ideology," and much recent research has explored the ways in which Wordsworth and Company have set the rules of the intellectual games we play. Clifford Siskin's 1988 book, The Historicity of Romantic Discourse, notes that this wholesale adoption of the Romantic ideology by twentieth-century critics was not intentional, but became, in keeping with the Romantic legacy, naturalized, almost intuited:

> It is not that earlier scholars have deliberately perpetuated the past; that they did so simply dramatizes how completely and invisibly the psychologized "reality" of Romanticism has determined our understanding of ourselves and of our writing.

(3)

Significantly for my purposes here, Siskin goes on to claim that during the Romantic period "writing became an expressive index" of the growth of self and mind. Such a definition of self, Siskin adds, is "culture-specific," a product of a certain historical and cultural moment.

What is curious and striking is that these two analytic approaches would happen at the same time. On one hand, compositionists like Ede, Lunsford, Gere, Bruffee, Brodkey, and others, attack the notion of the singular author, of writing as the expression of dynamic self, and more specifically label this discourse as Romantic. (Just by the way of added confirmation: a session on "Romantic Rhetoric" at the 1990 4Cs Meeting defended the idea of self-expressive discourse.) On the other hand, literary scholars undertake an assessment of how Romantic beliefs have become fixed in the paradigms of modern criticism and theory. The coincidence of these two critical re-evaluations suggests, first, that there really are things to be learned from bridging the gap between composition and literature; second, that these critical projects should and must be articulated. When we do articulate them, we discover that the notion of the lonely artist--which all of us have carried into the composition classroom--is indeed a product of a specific historical moment, and that the historical reality supports a collaborative approach to writing and knowing that has been buried for decades.

How did that collaboration work in the composing process,

specifically in the production of essays during the Romantic period? It seems clear that, despite some posturings by essayists like Hazlitt or De Quincey, in fact many of the most "personal" texts we valorize were produced in a collaborative environment. The key to that social sphere was conversation, talk in parlors, talk after dinner, talk over sherry, Table-Talk. Lamb put it succinctly in the rejected Dedication to the 1823 Elia. Essays when he asked the reader to give "fair construction, as to an after-dinner conversation; allowing for the rashness and necessary incompleteness of first thoughts; and not remembering... words spoken peradventure after the fourth glass..." (Works 2.299).

While Lamb's meaning of "conversation" seems limited to a specific kind of oral exchange, it is clear that he (and Hazlitt, as we shall see) was assuming an equivalency of conversation and text in meaning, in invention, and in structure; the essay seems to be "a technologically displaced form of conversation," as Bruffee puts it. While we could, with difficulty, accept a very limited definition of conversation and apply it to the making of Romantic essays, it seems more valid and credible to construe "conversation" broadly. While I take issue with Bruffee's covert assumption (following Vygotsky) that internalization occurs at some point in the composing process, simply because it could perpetuate the Romantic dogma of individualistic creativity, I do feel that Clark's definition of conversation as "a succession of texts that respond to each other in the process of defining

knowledge" (36) is broad enough to cover talk, letters, diaries, and even counter-texts.

In fact, modern compositionists were not the first to theorize (and valorize) conversation as an epistemological and psychological faculty. The notion of conversation was central to the processes of the Bluestocking circle; and the "Blues" (as they were called) did not simply mean oral discourse, but in fact minds working collaboratively. The benchmark text of this literary group is a poem by Hannah More, "The Bas-Bleu, or Conversation." Without conversation, More argues, "the Mind inactive lies" in reading and "idle vision;" with the blessing of conversation, the mind "strike[s] new light by strong collision" and "kindred souls demand alliance" where they find "the image answering to his mind" (Works 1.302-303). Invention, insight, and the growth of thought depends on the interaction between several minds; the solitary reader (to modify Brodkey's image) is condemned as passive and unimaginative. True thinking only takes place when "kindling sympathies unite"--when two thinkers verbally collaborate.

Of course, it was not simply ideas revised in collaboration, but texts--poems, essays, plays, etc.--modified as well. In one well-known instance, More "discovered" poetry by Ann Yearsley, a milkmaid, and edited and corrected her verses and raised a subscription for their publication (Jones 73-75). She was actively involved in the writing and publication of periodicals with her Clapham Sect circle and with her extended family,

especially her niece, Lucy Aikin, also a poet.

Evidence remains scanty as to how conversation and collaboration worked in the production of specific texts, but we do have a few examples. Besides the conservative Bluestocking circle, Radical writers in the 1790s also generated their own "writing group," centering around the publisher Joseph Johnson. Two writers in this coterie were the feminists Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays. Hays (1760-1843) became a protege of Wollstonecraft's after the latter published the Vindication; and the two women in the early 1790s the two women frequently met, discussed their texts, revised each other's work, and (fortunately for us) corresponded. While Hays's letters are not available, we do have Wollstonecraft's. The revisions she suggests are a clear-headed articulation of ideology and style. Responding to a deferential draft of the preface to Hays's Letters and Essays, Moral and Miscellaneous (1793), Wollstonecraft wrote

> I do not approve of your preface--and I will tell you why. ...Disadvantages of education &c ought, in my opinion, never to be pleaded (with the public) in excuse for defects of any importance... This kind of vain humility has ever disgusted me--and I should say to an author, who humbly sued for forbearance, 'if you have not a tolerably good opinion of your own production, why intrude it on the public? we have plenty of bad books already, that have just gasped for

breath and died.'

(219)

Evidently Hays had written a preface pleading her deficiencies and begging leniency from critics; Wollstonecraft's global revision was adopted by Hays: the only apology her preface makes is to quote a passage from the Vindication which blames flaws in the work on how "society is at present constituted" (Hays v). Another letter later that same year (1792) indicates even more clearly Wollstonecraft's participation in the writing process and her awareness of how style bears ideology:

> I have just cast my eye over your sensible little pamphlet [Cursory Remarks, publ. 1792], and found fewer of the superlatives, exquisite, fascinating, &c, all of the feminine gender, than I expected. Some of the sentiments, it is true, are rather obscurely expressed; but if you continue to write you will imperceptibly correct this fault and learn to think with more clearness, and consequently avoid the errours naturally produced by confusion of thought.
>
> ...I shall use a pencil so you may adopt or erase my corrections without much trouble.

(223)

We are fortunate to have this letter, but most evidence of the collaborative writing carried on by circles of women writers has been lost, devalued by gender bias. This is less true of the male essayists, of course, although we have only some snatches of

the conversations that played so important a part in their composing process.

For a point of entry into the composing processes of Lamb, Hazlitt, and the other London Magazine essayists, here is Hazlitt's discussion of how he wrote essays from the Advertisement to the Paris edition of Table-Talk (1825):

> I had remarked that when I had written or thought upon a particular topic, and afterwards had occasion to speak of it with a friend, the conversation generally took a much wider range, and branched off into a number of indirect and collateral questions, which... often threw a curious and striking light upon it.... It therefore occurred to me as possible to combine the advantages of these two styles, the literary and conversational; or after stating and enforcing some leading idea, to follow it up by such observations and reflections as would probably suggest themselves in discussing the same question in company with others.
>
> (Works 8.333)

Wollstonecraft's letter shows the collaborative dimension of revision; Hazlitt here indicates that conversation is integral both to inventio and dispositio, to planning and arranging.

The famous dinner parties of the London Magazine writers, or Londoners, as they called themselves, were the environment in which the invention stage of essay-making took place. The magazine's publisher, John Taylor, who hosted these festivities,

suggested the idea behind B.W. Procter's "On May Day," from which Lamb borrowed extensively for his own "The Praise of Chimney Sweepers." A major contributor, the dilettante/poisoner T.G. Wainewright, made his suggestions for articles both at the table and in the columns of the journal. Reviewing an exhibition at the Royal Academy, Wainewright wrote: "'Poor Relations', by Stephanoff, evinces very great and deep observation of nature....I think that our Elia would manage it beautifully--let me suggest it to him" (Chilcott 147-48).

Lamb's essay "New Year's Eve," which appeared in the January 1821 number, was doubtless suggested at a dinner party, probably by Taylor, and inspired at least three responses: a poem by Charles Elton, an essay by Horace Smith, and Hazlitt's "On the Past and Future." Again, the replies to and revisions of Lamb's ideas took place both at the table and in the pages of the magazine. "Do you keep the Past and Future?" Hazlitt wrote to John Scott, the early editor of the London. "You see Lamb argues the same view of the subject. That 'young master' will anticipate all my discoveries, if I don't mind" (Letters 203). By way of example, I append a passage from Lamb's and Hazlitt's essays to show how the two "collaborated" in the production of their essays.

Lamb frequently wrote drafts of his essays in letters to friends--again, if we accept Greg Clark's definition of "conversation," a kind of textual conversation. There is evidence that he discussed and rehearsed the narrative that became "Amicus

Redivivus" in gossip and in letters. Briefly, the essay recounts how Lamb's friend, George Dyer, absent-mindedly walked into the New River in broad daylight. Here is part of a letter Lamb wrote to Sarah Hazlitt in November 1823:

> Yesterday week George Dyer called upon us, at one o'clock (bright noon day) on his way to dine with Mrs. Barbauld at Newington.... The maid saw him go out from her kitchen window; but suddenly losing sight of him, ran up in a fright to Mary [Lamb]. G.D., instead of keeping the slip that leads to the gate, had deliberately, staff in hand, in broad open day, marched into the New River.
>
> (Letters 2.405)

The sentence structure, diction, persona, and pacing change markedly when Lamb shifts from the very intimate audience of a correspondent to a wider readership. Elia's December 1823 essay opens with this paragraph:

> I do not know when I have experienced a stranger sensation, than on seeing my old friend G.D., who had been paying me a morning visit a few Sundays back, at my cottage at Islington, upon taking leave, instead of turning down the right hand path by which he had entered--with staff in hand, and at noon day, deliberately march right forwards into the midst of the steam that runs by us, and totally disappear.
>
> (Works 2.209)

Another passage makes the contrast sharper. In his letter, Lamb wrote that

> ...a one-eyed fellow, dirty and drunk, was fetched from the Public House at the end, where it seems he lurks, for the sake of picking up water practice.... By his advice, the patient was put between blankets....
>
> (Letters 2.406)

This churlish fellow becomes considerably sanitized and ironic in the published version: "Life meantime was ebbing fast away, amidst the stifle of conflicting judgments, when one, more sagacious than the rest, by a bright thought, proposed sending for the Doctor" (Works 2.210).

The fact that Hazlitt, Lamb, De Quincey and other male Romantic essayists "wrote" their texts in conversation, in editorial meetings, and in letters is hardly startling, and some may agree with William Boggs's recent letter in College English complaining that collaboration is "a normal element in the development of most published writing" and hence not worth worrying a great deal about (227). But paradoxically Boggs illustrates the very point I want to make--that collaboration and conversation have not been recognized as an integral part of the making of the personal essay. Paradigmatically the emphasis has been on the adjective "personal"--"the essay is an act of personal witness," as a recent critic wrote (Good 23). And that paradigm--the essay that inscribes and describes Self--has significantly shaped composition pedagogy. At the same time, the

discourse community in which the Romantic personal essay was fashioned was androcentric and classist, and that fact does help explain why the masculine personal essay has been so privileged in belles lettres and in freshman writing classes. Ironically, it was essayists like Hazlitt and Lamb that entrenched the ideology of the solitary male author--even as they produced their texts through conversation and collaboration.

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APPENDIX: PARALLEL PASSAGES FROM "NEW YEAR'S EVE" AND "ON THE PAST AND FUTURE"

From Lamb's "New Year's Eve":

> I am naturally, beforehand, shy of novelties; new books, new faces, new years,--from some mental twist which makes it difficult in me to face the prospective. I have almost ceased to hope; and am sanguine only in the prospects of other (former) years. I plunge into foregone visions and conclusions. I encounter pell-mell with past disappointments. I am armour-proof against old discouragements. I forgive, or overcome in fancy, old adversaries. (Works 2.27-28)

From Hazlitt's "On the Past and Future":

> I have naturally but little imagination, and am not of a very sanguine turn of mind. I have some desire to enjoy the present good, and some fondness for the past; but I am not at all given to building castles in the air, nor to look forward with much confidence or hope to the brilliant illusions held out by the future. (Works 8.21-22)

From Lamb's "New Year's Eve":

> That I am fond of indulging, beyond a hope of sympathy, in such retrospection, may be the symptom of some sickly idiosyncrasy. Or is it owing to another cause; simply, that being without wife or family, I have not learned to project myself enough out of myself; and having no offspring of my own to dally with, I turn back upon memory, and adopt my own early idea, as my heir and favourite? If these speculations seem fantastical to thee, reader--(a busy man, perchance), if I tread out of the way of thy sympathy, and am singularly-conceited only, I retire, impenetrable to ridicule, under the phantom cloud of Elia. (Works 2.28-29)

From Hazlitt's "On the Past and Future":

> ...men attach more or less importance to past and future events, according as they are more or less engaged in action and the busy scenes of life. Those who have a fortune to make or are in pursuit of rank and power, think little of the past, for it does not contribute greatly to their views; those who have nothing to do but think, take nearly the same interest in the past as in the future. ...The past still lives in the memory of those who have leisure to look back upon the way that they have trod, and can from it "catch glimpses that may make them less forlorn." (Works 8.27)